HOMECOMING

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ABSTRACT

This collection of four short stories, if it adds up to anything at all, is a meditation on loss. And because a story about loss must also be a story about love, I hope this is also a meditation on love. These stories are otherwise unified only by a place, which is Oregon, as it exists in my memory. This collection spans from the Oregon suburbs, where I grew up, to the northeastern forests and waterways, and down to the rural flatlands south of there. These are places and feelings that have, for one reason or another, stuck with me.

What clarity or precision I have managed in this work was greatly enhanced by guidance from Brad Leithauser, my thesis advisor, and from James Arthur, my thesis reader. In other instances, Alice McDermott, Jean McGarry, and Eric Puchner have read various portions of what has become my thesis, and have all contributed invaluable direction.

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EMERGENCY MANEUVERS

We three brothers spent the afternoon outside in the haze and half rain. We trekked the empty field out behind the decommissioned paper mill where our father used to work and we were fallen upon by ashes from Mount St. Helens, which had erupted three days ago, and once more two days after. Though the wind took most of the ashes east, as far they said as Oklahoma, there was still the grey silt here, and the car tread through it on the roadways like a snow dusting. It looked like the beginning of the end of the world. This was March of 1980 in Oregon. Spring drizzling turned the ash to a fine black mud, which stole the petrichor from the air, and the earth smelled as if the grass and the trees and overgrowth would stop growing for good. I imagined that we would live out our lives in these grey ruins, and we would describe someday to children of our own how the world had looked when there was still green in the hills and red poppy blossoms on the shoulder of the highway, and blackberry bramble winding down to the runoff pond near the overpass where we had once seen nutria loitering in the mud and the cattails.

Carson, who was fifteen and the oldest of us, found a wooden boomerang beneath an ashy clump of grass, which he tore free and tucked into the back of his jeans as though it were a pistol. He hiked on, up over the low rocks and beneath us: the earth rolling down to a grey wasted farmland, and a grey distance farther on.

"Throw it, then," Denny said, who was ten—the youngest of us. He always wore shorts and spent a good deal of our outings tending thorn pricks on his shins.

"No," Carson said.

"Why not?"

"If it doesn't come back, I may not find it again." He waved his arm out at the impenetrable thickets of blackberry vines.

And I said, "If it doesn't come back, then it's broken anyway."

"It isn't broken," Carson said, and untucked his shirt from behind the boomerang so that we could only see the outline of it beneath the fabric. Carson had a bruise on his cheek, which he'd returned with one afternoon after school and said nothing about.

Our house was small, though our property was enough to house two cars that our father had long planned to get running again, and an old 125cc dirtbike, which was rusted out, and then behind the shed, beneath a black tarpaulin, our father's Ford Ranger, which was in danger of repossession. Our mother's new absence robbed the home of its warmth. Perhaps some of that, too, was the bit of ash hung in the air, and in windrows below the door.

Our mother had been, for the last week, an hour south in Coburg with our grandmother and our uncle and with our grandfather who was dying. Our grandfather never liked our father. We knew this even then because our father never hid it. "I'll be civil if he is," our father would say, which meant that no one would be civil. What frightened me most was not the idea of our grandfather dying, whom my brothers and I never knew all that well, but the sense that his death might change our mother so that she would become less like our mother.

She said grandfather saw skyscrapers where there were not skyscrapers. When he was driven through the one-story neighborhoods of Coburg, our grandfather had rested his head against the windows and said, “I know they’re not really there.”

“Maybe he’s just seeing the future,” our father said later. “Maybe you’re fussing over nothing.”

“There is no future,” she said, “however distant, where Coburg, Oregon is a thriving metropolis.”

“Who knows?”

“Coburg will get smaller every day and one day it’ll dry up and blow away in the wind. He’s dying. I don’t expect you to care.”

“All right.”

“I wish you’d care for my sake at least.”

“Sure,” our father said. “I wish that too.” He finished his beer and our mother went to bed and we three brothers listened through our door, cracked only enough to let in the muffled ghosts of their voices and a slip of light, which bent along the wall and caught Denny’s pupil so that it lit up like a cat’s.

We were here behind the paper mill, which was in the process of being torn down and the jagged metal innards of it, exposed, reminded me of a very large ship with the hull broken off. Our father had worked on the floor on machine number two. When they’d shut the plant down, first they shipped off what machinery they could sell. Great rows of trucks carted it all way, and our father said to us—as he traced the procession’s path down the highway—“I’ve turned every screw on that machine twice.” I think he was

more familiar with the press and the rollers than he was with our mother. It was only once that I crept into the kitchen in the morning and saw my father behind my mother, with his arms around her waist and his chin on her shoulder. It was only the once, and so I have kept this memory close. Father used to come home with grease-black hands and go immediately to the sofa, where he'd sit, for a moment, with his boots still on.

Now, with the mill gone, father and the other mill workers were like some generation of orphan children. He haunted his own home, and did not know what to say to us who lived there. He woke early in the blue-black mornings, and in the afternoons we watched him pass in and out of the room and then in again, as though there'd been something he'd meant to do, except he could not remember what it was.

We stood there in the ash fall and listened to the distant sound of the last few tinkerers in the mill, stripping the copper piping and wires and throwing it all in dumpsters. These were its last days and the sun was already setting, and we were there on the other side of the fence.

Denny was the first to catch the sound of a motor approaching. Our father's pickup climbed the hill and tossed up a small roostertail of ash.

"He's coming," Carson said.

"What do you figure for?" Denny said.

Carson shrugged. "Us, I guess."

I said maybe the repoman was snooping around again. Our father had, for a time, parked the pickup on the edge of Shelby's lot, beneath a gathering of plum trees, which Shelby had neglected, so that the fruit grew and fell and was lost in the weeds, where

hornets burrowed into it and came out too sticky to fly. Eventually Shelby noticed our father coming and going on his land and told him he could rent the spot. Since then, he began parking again on our lot, behind the shed. We'd been instructed to keep watch for towtrucks cruising the area.

With his elbow out the window, our father called to us, "Hey, boys. Come on. We're going out for a while."

Denny and I climbed around the passenger seat into the foldout seats in back, and Carson sat up front, since his legs were too long to fit in back. He untucked the boomerang from his belt. The windshield wipers on low squealed and dragged black smears across the glass, and the upholstery smelled warmly of stale cigarette smoke.

"Where we going?" Denny said.

"Where do you want to go?" our father said.

Denny shrugged and looked out the window.

"We'll just go out for a bit." He put the truck in gear. "We'll go for a drive. My father used to take the family out for a drive every Sunday." He looked at us all in the rearview mirror and said, "All right," and then we drove off. As we passed the mill our father only said, "Sad thing, isn't it?"

We brothers were just learning how to spend time around our father. After this many years of life, we'd become familiar only with the sound of his footsteps down the hall in the night, and in the mornings a cup of cold coffee on the endtable and the newspaper draped over a sofa arm, as though moved there by a bleary-eyed poltergeist. Today we found ourselves riding in the cab of his truck as though in the company of a stranger, although one who held some insight into our creation and our future.

There had never been such thing as a forty-hour workweek at the mill. After every shift father and the other men blew off an hour or two at the Golden Nugget Tavern to prepare themselves for home life, whether the shift had ended at seven in the evening or seven in the morning. Some times our mother had trouble sleeping and she'd load us up in the car for a night drive. We wore winter coats over our pajamas and rolled slowly by the mill lot until one of us could spot out father's pickup, which she made into a game for us, and once it was played and won, we would return home. Only one time were we unable to spot the pickup, and she did not sleep that night.

Our father traded glances between us in the mirror and the road.

"Listen, boys," he said. "Your mother called today. She said your grandfather died this morning. I don't know much more than that."

We were quiet. Our father turned off toward the little city center.

"Does that mean mom will be coming home?" I asked.

"Soon, Levi," our father said. "She's not ready just yet. But she'll be back."

"She say when?" Denny said.

"No, but she won't be long."

Our father noticed the old boomerang on Carson's lap.

"What do you got there, Carson?"

"A boomerang. Found it behind the mill."

Father looked at it for a few moments and nodded. "Think you're a little old for that?"

Carson shrugged.

"Why don't you give that to your brothers."

Carson tightened his grip on the toy and looked at our father.

"Go on," our father said. He studied Carson's bruise for a moment.

Carson lowered his eyes and handed the boomerang to Denny, who took it and looked at me as though for direction. He sat with it in his lap, with his hands not even touching it. We went on in silence.

"How about milkshakes, huh?"

He turned on to the main street, which extended for no more than seven or eight blocks, with the Snowcap near the center. Our father rarely offered these sorts of luxuries, and even more rarely in the recent months of his unemployment, so we betrayed no reaction for fear that he had misspoken, or that we had misunderstood. Still he parked alongside the curb and twisted the keys from the ignition and said, "Well come on already." The ash-covered street and streetside were empty except for a few lonely men with their hands in their pockets walking as if they had somewhere to be.

We tracked in grey footprints, and a small grey gust, and a bell above the door sounded. I had been here before, once, but not for, what felt like, a very long time. The booths were empty and the jukebox was playing and the walls were surfaced with wood paneling. There was a Coca Cola glass-door refrigerator behind the counter full with sodas, and in the bottom, in a cardboard box, a pile of tomatoes.

"Ah," said a mustachioed man at the counter. "A few souls brave enough for this doomsday weather." There was a girl behind him with an apron and a shy look about her, playing, it seemed, with some trinket in her pocket. She looked as though she might have been Carson's age.

"It'll take more than some ash to keep us home," our father said.

"So it seems," the man said. "What'll you have?"

"Chocolate milkshakes. All around," he said. "Except not for me."

We sat at a booth by the window and followed the ash through the orange light of the streetlamps. We watched the second floor windows of Main Street for the shapes of people passing behind the glass. Carson flicked away a flake of ash that had caught in Denny's lashes.

The restaurant girl brought us three milkshakes on a yellow tray and said, "Here you are." Carson said thank you and watched her pass back behind the counter and disappear behind the kitchen machinery. Carson stared for a while and then mixed his milkshake with the straw.

"Talk to her, then," our father told him.

Carson said, "Huh?"

"We see you watching her. Go talk to her."

"Why?" he said. "No." And then he took to drinking his milkshake as though it required his total focus.

"Carson—" Our father crammed his knuckles into his pocket and pulled out some money. "Actually, I would like a milkshake. Go order for me, would you? Just a small one. And don't you let her bring it over here. You wait there for it."

Carson looked at the money and then took it and made a fist of it. Our father caught his sleeve. "I want you to tell her your name. All right? It doesn't matter if she doesn't tell you hers. You tell her yours." Carson paused and then he nodded and went off.

Father and I watched him at the counter rubbing the back of his neck, and though we could hear his voice, we couldn't quite hear the words. She was a quiet, pretty thing. Redheaded and freckled and miniature in her proportions. I knew only that girls were pretty, but I hadn't any idea what to do with them. And then I noticed, and father after me, that Denny had picked a scab on his shin and he had a bit of blood on his fingers, which he was using to draw a stickman into the plastic, yellow backpad to the booth.

"Hey, Denny," our father said sternly.

Denny snapped to and looked at father with big eyes, as though waking from a trance. He looked at the blood on his fingertips. Denny held them up for us to see, pushing his thumb and index finger together and pulling them apart, which made a small, tacky noise.

"Christ, Denny," our father said. "People eat here." He sighed and massaged the bridge of his nose with his fingers. "All right. Go wash up. Get on." Denny hopped from the booth and dashed off to the bathroom.

"Christ," father said as he scooted out of the booth and to the other side where Denny had sat. "Dirty creature." He pulled a napkin from the dispenser and spat on it and scrubbed away Denny's little blood man. Then he looked at me and smiled wearily. We sat like this for a while and I drank my milkshake.

"Where'd Carson get the shiner?" he asked.

I shrugged.

"He didn't say anything about it?"

"No."

"You ask him?"

"No."

He turned his attention to the window, where he watched the ash through his reflection.

"You might be the quietest kid in the world, Levi," he said.

I thought about this. "Maybe."

"Well you shouldn't be, not if you can help it any. A man needs to be able to demand things of the world. Otherwise—I don't know. Otherwise it'll roll over you."

I felt very small then, and yet I was thrilled even so by the wholeness of my father's attention. I said nothing because it seemed too much to begin speaking now.

"Ah," our father said. "Maybe you shouldn't bother listening to me. I could've probably kept a few things to myself and been better for it. Maybe it's better to wish you'd said something than to regret saying something you shouldn't have. Maybe it'll all weigh on you just the same. Who knows? Never mind. Don't listen to me."

There are these moments when something about your own life—the course and nature of it—is revealed before you're ready for it, which leaves you braced as though against an force incoming from an unknown direction, like this: like me in a booth in the Snowcap with the jukebox playing a song I didn't know.

Carson returned, put a milkshake in front of our father and said, "I told her my name."

"Did you?"

"And she told me hers."

"And what was it?"

"It started with a J," he said, and smiled. He went to his milkshake.

"J?"

"She was quiet. It was a good name, but it was hard to hear exactly what she said."

Our father laughed and said, "That's something I guess." And then he drank his milkshake too and looked at it and seemed to think about it.

When Denny returned father made him show us his hands and his legs, and when father was satisfied with his cleanliness, he let him sit down. Denny was the first to ask about mother again, and our father said, "I told you, she didn't say when she'd be back. For all I know, it may be tonight. She may be on her way already. I can imagine that."

Knowing that it was possible, despite the way it felt in our guts, was some sort of relief. We brothers smiled. I imagined my mother's hands.

As we drove away father told us about an old man who had refused to leave his house on Mount St. Helens and who had died there by a lake, which was vaporized along with him. He was one of the few people killed by the eruption. Odd that something so massive could kill so few of us. As they considered the man's motives I sat there wondering about what my father had tried to tell me in the Snowcap—about the weight of words spoken and unspoken, which was not a weight I understood. And did that weight accumulate? I imagined then the weight my father seemed to collapse with into a sofa, and the heaviness of his footfalls through the hall, and the hunch of his shoulders up a set of stairs. No it did not make sense to me, so I sat there playing absently with my hands.

We didn't go straight home then. Maybe this was because there was a repoman still snooping around the property, or because we imagined the longer we stayed away,

the more likely it was that mother would be there when we arrived. And yet we had nowhere else to go. As if by instinct father drove us to the paper mill. He parked in the empty lot, situated with our backs to the road, and facing the broken shape of the mill in the dark. He said. “I want to teach you boys something. Pay attention back there.” He wrenched an elbow over the seat. “Here’s the thing: you may be the best driver in the world, but your car can still fuck you. Or foul you up. Don’t tell your mother I’m swearing. You need to know how to handle yourselves in an emergency.” He put the pickup in neutral and stepped out and said into the cab, “Trade me, Carson.”

Carson could drive manual. He used to move the car around to help father with chores. They stepped out into the semilit lot and exchanged a few words in the headlights before Carson climbed into the driver’s seat.

“All right. What happens if you’ve got a stuck accelerator?”

Carson looked at our father and then checked the pedals and said he didn’t know.

“Imagine the truck is speeding up and up.”

“All right.”

“What’s the first thing you do?”

Carson seemed unsure of the question itself, as though he were trying to discern our father rather than an answer, and as he sat there looking at him, Denny called out, “Hit the brakes.”

“Right,” our father shouted. “And then what? Say you speed up even more.” He waited and got tired and answered, “If you speed up when you hit the brake, it means you’ve been hitting the gas instead on accident. So take your feet off the pedals. And check—make sure the floormat hasn’t wedged the pedal down.”

"Ok," Carson said.

"You boys get that back there?" our father said over his shoulder. "Now let's say there's a real malfunction with the throttle and you weren't just being dumbasses. So you keep going faster, even feet off the pedals. Put her in gear, Carson."

Carson put the shifter into first and waited.

"I shouldn't have said that—about being dumbasses," father said. "We all do dumbass things occasionally and that's all right." He surveyed the lot and then he said, "Denny, I'm going to let you out. You see the push cart there?"

"Yeah."

"Move that out of the way."

"Where to?"

He thought about this as he got out so that Denny could exit from behind the seat, and he said. "I want you to push the cart as hard as you can that way." He pointed. Denny looked at him and smiled, and our father said, "That's right. Hard as you can."

We laughed wildly when Denny set-up behind the cart, which was loaded with a stack of copper piping, and threw all his strength into it. The cart went rattling and caromed off a curb and let a few pipes loose and clattering into the other aisle. Denny was quiet and then he held his arms up triumphantly and our father hooted.

"All right already," our father shouted. "Get back in here." Denny ran back and clambered in, and our father said, "Ok, buckle up then. Ok. Good, you're in first. In a moment here I want you to gun it. Get to the top end of second, you got that."

"Gun it?"

"Like a lead foot, Carson. And when I say so, throw her in neutral and start braking. You can do that?"

Carson paused and smiled and said that he thought so.

"And listen, when you brake, don't slam on it. You hit the brake all the way and we'll lock up. Once you've locked her up, we go skidding and there's no steering anymore. Keep your heel right there on the floor—good—and ease on just until the tires squeal. No howl though. Just a squeal. You ready? Don't think too much."

Carson, with his hands trembling on the wheel, nodded. I wanted to hug Denny in excitement. Our father clicked his seatbelt in place.

Father shouted, "First," and Carson let out the clutch and hit the throttle. Father shouted, "Second," and Carson lurched into second. The lot, which had seemed so much larger in the disuse of the night, collapsed on us, whirring us by lamppost and lamppost, and through a series of shadows. "Neutral," father shouted. "Brake. Yes!" He pounded joyously on the dash and shouted, "Yes!" Denny was clapping and hip hollering in the dark of the cab as we came to rest in a grey black cloud, which lit up nearly white in the headlights, hung there for a moment, and dissipated.

Father breathed deeply and regained himself and then, smiling over his shoulder at us, he asked, "And what if you can't get to neutral? What then?"

"Do we get to do it again?" Denny asked.

Carson was patting his fingers lightly on the wheel. "Then you have to kill the engine," he said.

Kill! What a word. We considered it for a moment—how it rattled in the heart.

"That's right," our father said. "We'll do it again. But now the clutch is out. The shifter is shit. Kill the engine. Get up to the top of second again. Denny, are you still buckled? Levi, make sure he's buckled."

I said he was.

"Carson, you know what it means when I say power brakes?"

Carson looked at the brake pedal and shook his head.

"Means that, once the engine's off, the brakes lose most their juice. That's what the emergency brake is for." He patted beneath the dash at the emergency pedal and he slapped Carson's knee. "You see that?" Carson saw it. "When I tell you to kill it, hit the clutch, go to neutral, turn the ignition, and push the emergency brake. You won't be able to steer much with the engine off. This is a last resort. You got that?" Carson pulled the car around into the aisle as if it were a runway. "Go," our father shouted. "Go, go go!"

And we went. Look at us. See us though this haze, how we went peeling through this empty lot and spinning plumes of ash as though we were the last people on earth, the four of us. And in this moment, it was as if we could outmaneuver all the sadness of the world—as if we could veer from, and outpace, and stop short of all the hurt that was coming to us. Look at us: thoughtless creatures made of joy and fear and muscle and pumping blood—I could feel it clicking in my neck. True, the moment was nearly gone. Even then our mother was washing her father's deathbed sheets, and the truck already belonged to the bank, and ash was raining from the sky. Yet nearly gone was not gone, because there we were going faster and faster still. What was there to hear except for the beating of our father's palm on the roof, and the chattering of our souls?

THE DROWNED WOMAN

Late in the summer Charlie Runk saw something floating in the reservoir. He called Sam over from the pile of wood he had been arranging into the firepit and they stood together for a moment and watched the black water, the shape in it, which was not moving and reminded Charlie of a hair caught and curled on a big still eye. Beneath them the thick muck shore glistened in the moonlight and extended back into the brush, and there a few fallen water-worn trees and apple-sized stones scattered around. Even here, twenty some miles from the nearest city, there was garbage. There was a torn grocery bag in the limb of a split-backed juniper, and a broken sandal on a rock, and half a beer bottle beneath that with the label washed off. The moon was both in the sky and reflected in the lake.

"That's not a log, is it?" Charlie said.

"No, I don't think it is."

"That's a person. Christ, Sam, it is, isn't it?"

"Might be."

"It alive, you think?"

"No. I don't think so."

Charlie called out to the shape and asked if it was alive. He threw a handful of mud out into the water, which broke apart into ripples, and took apart the vision of the moon and did not stir the shape.

Sam looked out behind them at the dirt trail, which led to the decommissioned turbine house where the men had been sleeping now since the fall. The walls were mostly

whole still, but doorless, and the corrugated roof had collapsed in some areas where stones had fallen from the overhang above. In other areas the roof was bent and holding rocks and threatening to collapse at any moment, perhaps at night as Charlie slept right beneath it, straight upon him, like cracking his head open, sending him from one dark to the other without any moment of consciousness. He thought about this sometimes, but the worry was not enough to keep him awake. The men slept curled around paint-chipped turbines and gears and stale machine belts that had split and littered the place with black splinters of rubber.

And some distance beyond the turbine hall there was the white glow of headlights buried in the dark of the forest. Sam turned back to Charlie, who was watching the figure in the water carefully, flicking his fingers with his thumb.

Sam said, “That car probably belonged to it in the water.”

“What do we do?”

“Not sure there’s anything to be done.”

“Could still be alive.”

“I don’t think so.”

“Go check,” Charlie said.

“You go. I already know what I’ll find.”

“I can’t. My foot, Sam. I’m still drying out the infection.”

“The car must have belonged to it there in the water, don’t you think?”

“Maybe it’s alive.”

“Couldn’t be alive.”

“Would you just check, Sam?”

"What for?"

"I dunno, Sam. But if it were me, I'd like for someone to give a damn, even if I was dead. I'd like for someone to check anyway. Just to know. Wouldn't you?"

"No one would give a damn, Charlie."

"Well, even so, that's what I'd want."

So Charlie sat on the stump and pulled his boots off and his socks, which had fused to his misshapen foot. He hung them from a half-fallen tree.

"Christ. The stink, Charlie," Sam said. "The stink of it."

"I know," he said, and eased his foot down into the coolness of the mud, felt it soak into his split skin. The pain was more distinct every day. It was as though his body was waking up to another world, which was more real, and more painful. The feeling of it oscillated between aches, low and warm and steady as love, and lances of white agony, which shook the whole of him, up to his rattling eyes. Walking on it was still possible, but only barely and there was then the feeling that this possibility was nearing the edge of itself—and after that? He imagined he'd have a long time to sit and to think about this when it happened that he could no longer stand.

He waded out and found that the shape was a woman and the woman was dead. Charlie called out to Sam, "It's a lady." The dead woman turned over effortlessly in his arms in the water. He held his ear to her lips and didn't hear anything. Charlie hadn't touched a woman in a very long time.

"Dead?" Sam asked.

"Yeah."

"I said so."

"She's a pretty thing, Sam," he said. Her hair was dark and smooth and galvanized with silver bands of moonlight. Her skin was colorless mostly, except for a faint purple beneath her eyes and at the corners of her mouth. She was wearing jeans, and a sweater floating loosely about her torso in the water—which was trim and built as though to cradle a pair of hands, there at the hips, like this, with the thumb pressed into the muscled back and then the fingers there down the curve of the abdomen. It was a haunted beauty in her face, which came to him like a lullaby but across a great distance. Her eyes were open. Sam yelled at him to leave her, but Charlie took her anyway beneath the arms and towed her back to shore.

"Can't leave her out here to sink—not to the lake bottom."

"Sure you can. Seems like as good a place as any."

"Not here in the algae and the weeds. She'll fall apart."

"She'll fall apart anywhere, Charlie."

He pulled her ashore until her feet were just above the waterline. Charlie knelt down beside her and Sam followed.

"You're right," Sam said. "She is a pretty thing. Shame."

"Where do you figure her shoes went?" Charlie said.

Sam considered her feet for a moment and then he said, "Car must be hers. She must have drowned just here. She must have walked right by us." Charlie moved the strands of hair from her face and Sam patted her front jean pockets, and then he pushed his hands beneath her to go through her back pockets, which made Charlie wince. "No wallet. But here—" Sam removed his knuckles from her pocket with some difficulty, "—

here we are." He held a key chain out in his palm. "Sure those must be her lights out back."

"Must be."

Sam looked down at her bare feet, traversed the length of her body, pausing over a pale strip of midriff. He ran his thumb over the nub of her hip.

"Hell, Sam," Charlie said. "Cut it out."

"Cold, isn't she?"

"I'm serious, Sam. Cut it out."

"Cool off," he said.

Sam left to find the car and Charlie stayed for a few moments and looked at the woman and wondered how long she'd been dead. He struggled with his socks and his boots, and was unable to fit the second boot back over his infected foot, because the foot was swollen and because it hurt and because he worried he might pull it apart, so he left the boot and put his foot instead into a plastic grocery bag and tied it off around the ankle.

He found Sam in the driver's seat of an old Volvo, rummaging through the glove compartment. Illuminated by the interior light, Sam looked like an animal in a terrarium. "No wallet here either," Sam said. "Registration though. Car belonged to an Evelyn Barnard. Figure that was her in the water."

Through the tinted windows Charlie saw a child's safety seat illuminated by the light above the center console.

"You didn't see a kid out there in the water, did you?" Charlie asked.

"I didn't. Why?"

"Kiddie seat back here."

Sam looked back for a moment and he said, "Go figure."

"Think she was a mother?"

"Appears so." he said as he rifled through the center console, finding only a pack of tissues, a comb and a travel-sized bottle of hand moisturizer. He knocked down the visor and knocked it back up.

"I don't get it," Charlie said. "What was a mother doing out here in the dark?"

"Quiet a place as any for it."

"For what?"

"Dying it seems."

"I don't think that's it. Something else must have happened."

"Even mothers kill themselves."

"She doesn't look the sort."

"My grandmother," Sam said, "she took the family car out into the fields with a grill in the backseat. Suffocated herself with the fumes. That's how they found her. Didn't matter that she was somebody's mother." Sam wrenched around and went through the pockets at the back of the seats. "And how would you know anyway what sort she was?"

"Should we be rifling through the car, Sam?"

"Nobody's car anymore."

"We ought to tell someone about her."

"Who?"

"Somebody must be looking for her. Someone will wonder where she's gone."

"Suppose we could drive the car into the city. Tell the police."

Charlie backed away from the car a ways, hobbling. "I don't know," he said. "Doesn't seem right, driving her car. Feels like stealing."

"We've stolen before."

"This feels different."

Sam gave up searching the cab and stepped out and made for the trunk. "All right, Charlie. How then? Should we shout about it until a hiker hears us?"

"I dunno."

There was nothing in the trunk except a pair of sandals and an empty water bottle.

Sam stood back with Charlie for a moment and looked the car over and jostled the keys in his palm absently. "I'll drive it in to Estacada. Let them know we found her."

"I think I'll stay."

"What for?"

"I'll just wait for you here. You tell them and I'll be here. Just to be sure."

Sam nodded and got in the car and twisted the key in the ignition and idled there a moment. He rolled down the window. "You can just wait here then," he said. And then he drove off. The red glow of the taillights dissolved into the forest and then the sound too, of the car, and of the gravel beneath the tires, went quiet and there were only the lonely noises of the trees and the nighttime and a bird somewhere hoot hooting.

* * *

Charlie sat on a rock some yards away from the woman and watched her lying there. He saw the stillness in her chest, and the lifeless angles of her feet and her fingers. It was cold out and the fire was dying and the wood was mostly burned up. Sam would not be

happy about it, but Charlie decided anyway that it would be best to take her inside the turbine house. He thought she would do better there. Charlie was once able to carry a woman in his arms, but he was not anymore. She was too heavy for him and his hurt foot, and she was ragdoll limp so that he couldn't get the right hold on her. He knelt in the mud beside her and tried to rock her up into his grip. He slipped his arms beneath her back and beneath her thighs. Her head tossed around in the effort, lolling about on her little birdlike neck, so he gave up and caught his breath and apologized to the woman. He took her beneath the arms and dragged her over the threshold of the old stone room and laid her down in a corner where the roof still held.

"This'll be better in here," he said.

Charlie set up that night on the opposite corner of the room beneath a hole in the roof, beneath a small and starless cutout of overcast sky and he fell asleep thinking about her name—Evelyn Barnard—and how it seemed to suit her somehow.

In the morning Charlie remembered her and found that she was still there and saw her for the first time in the daylight. Her hair had dried some and was auburn now and her mouth was slack and half open. Open eyes. My lord. It was as though she was about to say something, or to ask what became of her. Charlie felt sorry for her. And then he felt guilty for looking at her so shamelessly when she hadn't the ability to consent or to leave or to adjust her shirt over her white, crescent slip of midriff, so he stepped outside. On the other side of their camp there was a deer standing like a statue of a deer, which ran off after a moment that seemed much longer than it was.

Charlie walked the shore, watching for stray fishhooks and bottle pieces. He paused occasionally to rest his foot and to watch the water exhale wisps of steam into the

morning light. There was a bark-stripped pine limb there between the rocks, which Charlie took as a walking stick. He didn't notice the smell of the place anymore—of the water, the fish in it and the algae, and the wet dirt, and the tree needles. Someone else might have stood here with his hands on his hips and a foot there heeled on a stone and he might have surveyed the distances of the world. He may have felt at peace here. Ahead there was a creek that entered the reservoir, which was where Charlie and Sam cast the wire crawdad pot. Charlie picked up the nylon towline and hauled it in and felt the cage trundle along the creek-stone floor. He found four of them there—four copper-brown and bug-like bodies. Tiny divers. One was half-formed and missing a claw. As he plucked them up with his fingers, just at the start of the tail, they arched back and pinced their claws and tried to catch hold of him too. He set them in his jacket pockets and threw the pot back midway into the creek and walked back with the muddy crustaceans pulsing dully against his thighs.

Charlie started the fire and a pot of water on that and then the crawdads into the hot crackle of it, where they clicked about for a while and died and turned a pretty shade of red. Except for two he set aside for Sam, Charlie cracked their tails open and sucked the meat from the claws, then crushed what was left into chum, which he'd bait the crawdad pot with later. He poured a tin mug of still-warm crawdad water and sipped on that, leaning against the wall of the turbine shack. These were the necessities of life and for long time he had made do, except there was now a woman now behind the wall, which made Charlie feel both more and less alone all at once.

The afternoon wore on and the shadows of trees receded beneath the trees. Charlie watched the road, and sunlight on it falling through the forest in heavy slabs. Sam needed

perhaps only a few hours to reach the city and relate the news and to return. It had been longer than that. Charlie thought maybe it was the precinct—that they'd held on to him for some reason, or that they'd been away dealing with drunken railroad workers who had lost their jobs. It was possible too that Sam had stopped somewhere. It was possible that Sam still knew people other than Charlie. He and Sam only met each other out here, like this, already the way they were.

Sam didn't return that night. The firelight did little against the coming dark—and then the wholeness of it—the height of the forest blocking out the small relief of the moon and the stars.

In the night it rained hard. Turned the firepit ash to black mud. Pellets of water panged against the metal roof and collected in the corrugated grooves and ran down into the shack in dark ribbons. Charlie woke and pulled up his blankets and his cardboard padding and stood for a moment undercover. The room wasn't large, and felt even smaller because of the rows of turbines and forgotten machinery, which rarely occasioned for the shape of a man lying down. All that was left was the space next to the woman and the wall. So Charlie lay next to her. This is how he and Sam had slept too when it rained, or in the winter when cold fronts came and froze the mud shore into little stalagmites. They lay like this and matched the patterns of their breathing and fell asleep, waking each other some nights with soft sleeptalking pleas for forgiveness.

Charlie adjusted himself deep into his bundle of blankets and caught the woman with his elbow, but she did not move. The quiet of the place was beaten up by the metallic pitter-patter above them.

There was a smell in the room. The smell was small enough still, but it was with them in the room. Something spoiled. Charlie knew the smell may be the death on her—there was every few hours a more distinct hollowness to her cheeks, and clouds in her eyes, a color in her skin—but then he thought perhaps the smell was him too. There was the bag over his foot, though it had small holes enough to let some amount of water in and maybe some sick out. It was hot and it was thick with moisture and he remembered vaguely how it had looked uncovered in the dark—the shape of it. He was afraid to inspect it in the daylight anymore. The smell of rot was on them both perhaps.

It wasn't just rancid. It was that too—that was what lingered afterward in Charlie's nostrils—but there was a sweetness beneath it, which reminded him of something he couldn't recall. The memory was gone but there was the place where the memory used to be, and there was something Charlie recognized in the shape.

* * *

Charlie ate the other two crawdads and recast the crawdad pot, and later stood in the doorway to the shack, leaning against what little was left of the wooden doorframe. He thought about the child seat in the car—its little buckles. He thought about tiny hands.

Sam was not there in the morning. Charlie tied a second bag over his foot since the first had begun to tear, and then he followed the old fire road up a ways, up through the first curves along the hillside. It led only to the lake, not through to anywhere. Charlie went on until he reached the pair of crosses there at the shoulder. There was, on each, a wire ring hung at the joint, which had been strung once with a wreath of flowers, or with ribbons or paper hearts. One cross slouched crookedly, so Charlie hammered it into the gravel with a stone and he looked at them a moment—at their twin shadows—and then

he turned and began walking back to camp. For the first time, it felt as though there were only so many footsteps left in him anymore, and that each was one forever expended. There were places he had not planned to travel to, but now he was unable. He had not planned to return home, wherever that was, but now he could not anyway. This was it. This was the extent—these hills, these shores, these the exact bounds of human existences.

Night came again and the rain with it. Charlie returned to the dead woman's corner and settled beneath the blankets beside her. The smell of decay was there with them and it was stronger now. But there was some small relief in it—that it was both of theirs maybe, and either of theirs maybe, and it was good not to know which. He breathed a while through a mildewed blanket, but slipped soon enough into half sleep—he felt the size of the world throb and tremble in the dark with his heartbeat—and he let the blanket slip. Charlie took the scent to sleep. He traced through to the sweetness of it. Peeled through the layers of it, down to the heart. He forgot himself and wanted to breathe it in and feel it from the inside.

* * *

In the morning there was the sound of a car and then the sound of car doors opening and closing. Charlie left the woman and stood out by the fire pit with a blanket shawled around his shoulders. It wasn't Sam, and it wasn't rangers. It was a man who had come down the path and his kid son beside him holding a fishing rod. When the man saw Charlie standing there he stopped and the kid, a few paces after, saw this and stopped. The man surveyed the camp.

"Morning," he said.

Charlie nodded. “Morning.”

“You set up here?”

Charlie looked around, at the few pots and a plastic bucket and his boot still upright in the dirt. “Yeah.”

“You’ve got the view.” He gestured to the water and the opposite shore.

Charlie nodded.

The boy studied the turbine house behind Charlie and edged out a ways and leaned his head to the side. Charlie stepped back a few paces and leaned up in the doorway.

“What’s in there?” the kid asked. His father put a hand down on his shoulder.

Charlie said, “Nothing. Just where I’ve set up.”

“What’s it for?” the kid asked.

“Nothing anymore. Just where I sleep.”

“You live here?” the boy asked incredulously.

The man slung his hand down across his kid’s chest and pulled him back a step. “He’s camping out, bud. We’ve camped out.”

“That’s right,” Charlie said.

“We use tents,” the kid said.

And the father told him, “This works too.” He thought a moment and watched Charlie. And then he said, “Much to catch out there?”

Charlie looked down at the reservoir. “Crappies mostly. Some trout.”

“Is your foot okay?” the kid said.

“Just a bit swollen is all.”

"Is that your shoe over there?"

"That's it."

"Come on," the man said, "let's go try our luck."

The kid trotted off and walked backward for a ways to see if he couldn't catch a glimpse into the turbine house, but Charlie made sure he couldn't. The man studied Charlie for a moment. He had the look of someone about to say something, but then he smiled curtly and nodded and followed his kid to the water.

For a couple hours the father and his son stood out there fishing, and for a couple hours Charlie sat against the turbine house and watched. A few times the boy tangled his line around the rod or hooked it on a drowned tree and the father stooped with his pliers and made it right. Charlie wished first that they'd move on soon, but after a while he relaxed and listened to their voices travel out across the water in soft echoes. He saw low-flying birds chase their reflections over the lake. Charlie thought to himself that Sam was never coming back.

Then the kid went hip hollering and Charlie could see the rod buckle over and he heard the father shouting out instructions. What they pulled from the water, he could see from this distance, was a rainbow trout. He saw the color catch the sunlight, throwing off sharp glances of ruby and green. The father and the son marveled at the fish for a while. The boy ran his fingers down the wet, shimmering body. They looked back at Charlie and held up the fish for him to see.

They walked back to the camp, the father holding the rod and the kid holding the line wrapped around his hand and the fish hanging from it. The three of them looked at

the fish in silence and agreed in that way that the fish was good. It was the best looking trout Charlie had ever seen. The father nodded to his kid.

"Here," the kid said to Charlie. "Have it."

Charlie thought about this and he said, "That's your catch. Trout's a good fish."

"We normally catch and release," the man said. "There's my wife who's got a meal probably ready. So go on. Or we'll turn it loose."

"All right," Charlie said.

"You got some place to put it?"

Charlie gestured to the bucket.

"RJ," the man said to his son, "why don't you go fill that bucket with water."

"How much?"

"Doesn't matter."

The kid handed the line and the fish to Charlie and then ran off with the bucket. The metal handle had cracked off in some past life so the kid held it in his arms against his chest.

Charlie watched the kid go and felt the man watching him. From this vantage, through the shack door, through a series of gaps in the old machinery, Charlie could see the dead woman's feet.

"Let me ask you something," the man said.

"What?"

"Have we met before?"

"You and I?"

"Yeah," the man said, a bit embarrassed. "You look familiar to me. Did you grow up nearby?"

"No," Charlie said. "Not nearby." He had grown up two states over.

"You look familiar is all. You ever know a Charlene Elligsen?"

"No," Charlie said. "Not that I recall."

"There was a guy who used to run with her sometimes. Used to see him coming and going. This would have been something like fifteen years ago."

Charlie shrugged.

"You're sure?"

"I am."

"Huh. Well then you look a lot like someone I used to know."

Charlie shrugged again. The kid was returning now, holding the bucket with some difficulty.

"Now that I think of it," the man said. "It's possible he died—the fellow you remind me of. I feel like I heard something about that."

"That's a shame."

"It is," the man said. "Such a shame. And that I'm here too, not knowing one way or the other, thinking I might pass him on the street." He paused. "You're sure you're not him?"

"No," Charlie said. "That isn't me."

LITTLE BIRDS

I was thirteen when I met Mackenzie, and she was thirteen too. She lived next door, and though her bedroom was on the second floor and mine was on the first, the placement of the wood-plank fence allowed us to communicate through our windows, but only as much as flicking the lights on and off, and waving to say hello and waving to say goodnight, which was enough.

Mackenzie's father was named Dave. He was a doughy-faced man, which was pronounced somehow by the leanness of his frame, and by the small roll of his gut over his little waist. Dave sold my parents our house. He gave up the commission on it too, and I hadn't understood what that meant except that he liked my parents. What it meant, I learned later, was that he wanted them to like him too. Mackenzie's mother was sick for as long as I knew her. She refused to eat, and she refused to drink tap water unless it was filtered through a system of styrofoam cups and paper towels, which she had designed herself. She said it was the only way to rid the water of the petrol toxins that were killing her, and all of us too.

My father was a doctor, and when I asked him what petrol toxins were and were they killing us all too, and should we be drinking through handfuls of disposable dinnerware, he said, "There's no such thing. The only thing killing Mackenzie's mother is herself." He explained to me how the head can get just as sick as the body, which is why my grandmother killed herself when my father was my age.

My father told me not to say any of this to Mackenzie, and it frightened me to keep a secret that large and important from her. I was plagued with the urge to shout, always, "Mackenzie, everything is okay. You're mom isn't being killed by petrol toxins, because there's no such thing!"

Mackenzie, who was an only child, spent most of her time alone and unsupervised. Because her mother was unsettling and depressing, her father spent as much time as he could outside the house. He worked late and early. During the weekends, he picked fruit. He picked what was in season. Blueberries in the summer, and raspberries and strawberries. He picked apples in the fall. He picked fallen walnuts from the ground. When he encountered stretches of blackberry bramble alongside the road, he picked that too. We'd seen him before, with his car parked on the shoulder, picking through berry vines, and my parents called hello to him through the car window. Dave picked whatever there was to pick, and he divided the bounty up into cartons, and those into cardboard boxes, and he delivered them to his clients, since he had few friends. Sometimes this earned him invitations to dinner, or to lunch or coffee—from my parents it did, which was time also spent not at home and in the company of his wife who was convinced that she was dying of petrol toxins, which supposedly came from the road and the cars on it.

* * *

I met Mackenzie in the summer, from the other side of the fence that separated her yard from mine. I saw her clipped silhouette passing between the boards, appearing and disappearing in the mysterious undulations of her movement, jilted and fragmented by the fence planks, like a flipbook missing frames. And what was I doing? I don't

remember. I was moving, but pretending not to move, seeing her, but pretending not to see her, holding still with the pauses of her footsteps. And then she stopped. Her hair, I remember, caught the sunlight, and though it was brown and red, there were stripes of golden white where the sun glanced it right. And she said, "Hey, you."

"Who?" I said.

"You live next door. You live here."

"Yes."

"My father sold you this house."

"To my parents," I said. "Yes."

And then, she said, "Will you help me save the chickens?"

And because I had absolutely no idea what she meant, I said, "Okay." And then her fingers appeared up above the fence, curling over it, and then her face, only the top of it—her eyes, but not the mouth, not her crooked teeth, and only briefly before she lowered herself down again.

She said, "You don't have friends, do you? Not any, do you? You're all alone."

"I need to go," I said.

"I didn't mean for that to sound mean," she said.

"All right."

"But the chickens. Will you help me? Your shirt is funny, did you know that?"

And I said yes again. To both. To all of it.

"Will they miss you?" she asked.

"Who?"

"Your family. Your parents. Whoever. Will they notice you're gone, just for a while?"

I thought about this for a moment. "No," I said.

"Good," she said. "I want to show you something." And then she said that her name was Mackenzie and she displayed the shape of her eye between the planks of the fence, there next to a knot in the wood—just an eye. "Meet me in the field behind our yards. Give me two minutes. Less than that." She began to leave the fence, but then she stopped. "Wait," she said. "Bring pennies."

"Why? How many?"

"Bring three pennies. Bring four. It doesn't matter."

Behind our yards there was a field, which was green and hid you up to the thighs, and farther on there was a small expanse of woods covering the hill that divided this suburb from the suburb next to it. A railroad passed through the middle of it, which we heard howling in the night. The field and the forest covered what felt like half of the world. I imagined it was all of us that heard the train, and that some nights we all woke in a panic and felt as though we were being transported somewhere against our will.

Mackenzie took more than two minutes, but I didn't mention it. She emerged and latched the fence behind her. She said, "I didn't ask your name because I already know that it's Cole. My dad told me that. Did you know my mom is dying?"

"My parents told me," I said.

"Okay, well I don't want to talk about that." She pointed out toward the woods, "We're going this way." Mackenzie led me past the field and into the woods to the

railway, which we followed in one direction for a brief time until it crossed a road, not saying anything, except for, “Did you bring the pennies?”

“Yes.”

“Put them on the track. Have you ever done that before—flattened pennies?”

“Once.”

“Okay, well I haven’t. We can find them tomorrow. Remember this spot—there is that rock there. Now come on. They’re dying right now. The chickens.” She said, and then went on a few paces ahead of me. She plucked a leaf from a low hanging limb and dropped it. Mackenzie had said tomorrow, which meant I would see her tomorrow, also that she wanted to see me again, which I felt in my stomach, or just above the stomach—the hollow place in the high center of you.

The road took us to a chicken farm like she said it would—a one-story structure, with corrugated, metal walls out in a gravel lot behind a white home, which appeared to have been built and added to in different efforts over the years.

“We aren’t stealing. Not really,” She said. “But be quiet anyway. I heard the chickens. We are trespassing though.”

“I don’t hear it,” I said.

“No, well we’re not close enough.”

I thought that she was possibly making this up, all of it except her name, which excited me anyway—that she had lured me into the woods for some mysterious purpose—but it was true. As we approached the rear of the building there was a tiny, horrifying noise, which came from a metal garbage can. High-pitched crying, like tiny people, inhabitants of a small, burning city. It rang lightly against the metal, which made

it sound, somehow, far away, even when we stood right above it, and Mackenzie with her hand on the lid. It made me feel lonely, like falling asleep on the school bus coming home, which happened to me once, and waking up alone in the depot.

The garbage can was full of chicks—little, yellow and screeching and flapping their wings, which were only featherless nubs and did nothing. The whole bin pulsed with the sum of their tiny, frantic movements, like a panicked heart.

"Why are they throwing them away?" I asked.

"Because they thought nobody would find out. They thought we wouldn't hear them." She set the lid down. "Here," she said. "Hold your shirt out like this." She grabbed the hems of her shirt and held it out like a bowl in front of her body. I mimicked her. "Good," she said. She began taking up careful handfuls of the baby birds and easing them into my shirt. I felt the small heat of the bodies against my stomach, and the twitching movement of the living bundle—the tiny points of their ringed feet.

Mackenzie filled up her shirt too and she said, "The ones at the bottom are already dead." She stared at them for a while. "They couldn't breathe underneath the others. Can you imagine it?"

"No," I said.

"Well I can. Let's go."

We set the chickens loose in a wire pen in the shed behind her house, where there were buckets of gardening supplies and an upturned shovel and a rake and a woodcutting axe with a notch broken out of the blade. The pen was the sort for a dog, except hers, she said, had died in the winter. Its name was Sally, and they had to put her down.

"It's pink," she said. "The stuff they killed her with. The stuff in the needle. I didn't expect that."

I stood there with her and thought about that and watched the little birds stumble about the shed floor and fall over. Two were dead by the time we'd gotten them to the pen, or they were already dead when we'd put them in our arms. We buried them in the yard in little graves we dug with our hands. She said a sort of prayer for them, except not to God. She said, "Forgive us for all we did to you little birds." And then she said to me, "You probably think we put Sally down because she was sick, but she wasn't. She wasn't sick at all. She bit my little cousin on the face. He's okay, but he had stitches, and a scar now right here." She ran a finger down from the corner of her brow to the curve of her jaw.

* * *

I waited the next day on the back porch and listened for the sound of Mackenzie's sliding door so that we could find each other again by accident, which we did at the turn of the afternoon. I heard her door and saw her slip through her yard and out the fence, making no noise except for the metallic clip of the fence latch. I waited, but she didn't look for me there. I watched her trek into the field with her fingers loose and at her sides and pulling through the blades of grass. When it was clear that she was leaving without me, I trailed out behind her. She turned around when she heard the fence close after me, but only quickened her pace.

"Hey," I called out. "Wait."

"You can't go with me today," she said. "I'm sorry, but you can't come."

"I thought we'd get the pennies."

"I'm sorry, Cole," she said.

Because I was confused, and because my heart felt like breaking—and breaking for the first time, which I resolved to avoid, since I knew, even here, and in whatever capacity, that once it broke I would never be able to unlearn that—I slowed down, but followed her to where the trees began. We walked like this for a while, silently, except for the snapping twigs beneath out feet, and me with my hands in my pocket and with my head down and glancing up only to track her ghostly movement through the forest.

"So walk with me if you have to," she said. "If you're going to do it anyway."

"I'm sorry."

"No you're not. You'd have left me alone if you were sorry. So don't apologize. Just walk with me."

"Where are we going?"

"Just here a little farther. But then I have to leave. I'll come back, but I have to leave for a while."

"Where will you go?"

"You get the pennies and meet me here."

And then from deeper in the woods, from the other side of the railroad tracks, we heard a whistle. And then a voice calling once, "Hey, Mackenzie?"

She looked back at me and she held a finger up to her lips, and then she put her hands on my shoulders and set me behind a tree. "Just wait," she said. Mackenzie jogged out into the open. I watched from behind the tree as she met a boy, who was older than me by a few years. He looked just old enough to drive a car. She took him by the wrist and led him away. I stayed there until there were only the soft, lonely noises of the forest.

After that I followed the tracks out to the road, entertaining with ever step, the thought of running home, where I could forget about Mackenzie, and about the boy, and about the desperate noises of the chicks and their helpless, marshmallow bodies, but I found the coins instead. Three of them were easy to find, throwing red glints of light at the eye. One took me longer, left me on my knees in the gravel sweeping through handfuls of leaves, but I found this one too. I laid it flat against my cheek and felt the stale warmth of sunlight in it. Their ridges and their numbers were gone and only the Lincoln face, if you looked long enough, was there, but had been pulled apart like dough. They fit snugly between the grooves of my palm in my palm, nearly as thin as fingernails.

Mackenzie returned to me after fifteen minutes or so. She came back alone, striped in the forest's daytime shadows.

"I found the pennies," I said.

"All four?"

I was quiet for a moment, knocking the metal pieces around in my palm. "Who was he?" I asked.

She said, "Please don't ask me about him."

"All right," I said.

We stood there in silence. "I'm glad you're here though," she said, which struck me as one of the kindest things you could say to anyone. "Can I see them?"

I handed her the copper pieces.

"You can't spend them anymore," she said. "But pennies aren't worth anything to begin with."

"I know," I said.

"Did you know it's against the law to ruin money? Except no one would ever get you in trouble for this. There are laws like that. I think they're prettier this way."

"You can have them," I said, but she put the pieces back in my hand and started walking back toward home.

"No," she said. "I don't want you to give me anything."

"All right," I said.

"I didn't mean for that to sound mean."

"I know."

And then she stopped. "Just one," she said. "I'll have just one."

So I gave her one piece of the four, which she rubbed between her fingers and slipped into her pocket. "Thank you."

* * *

The chickens huddled up. They congregated in the corner of the pen, all mashed into each other. We took this to mean that they were cold, which we did not know how to fix. And they shit a lot. We didn't expect how much they'd shit. We began laying down newspaper to make it easier to clean. Occasionally they died. We did our best.

She didn't tell her parents, and I didn't tell mine. The birds were our secret children. It made me feel close to her. We took them heels of bread and tore those up into pieces for them. We felt guilty for lying, and for stealing, but we felt heroic too, and we felt religious.

Mackenzie's parents were not around enough to notice—not the birds, or the company she kept, or where she spent her time. Her mother did her best to never leave the house, and rarely left even the guest bedroom. Mackenzie said her mother began

sleeping there in hopes that it would help her rest at night, to be away from her father's snoring—the toxins in her body made it difficult to sleep—and though the guest bed didn't seem to help, Mackenzie's mother continued to sleep there anyway.

I spoke to Mackenzie's mother on only one occasion, a week or so after we'd rescued the chickens. She rang our doorbell, which surprised my parents—especially to see her in the sunlight, and to see the bones pressing through her skin and the color of her veins in her face. I imagined holding her up to a flashlight and how she would glow like a paper lantern of a woman. She said hello to me. She asked if I was Cole, and I said that I was. My father asked me to give them some privacy, so I left them in the living room and turned on the TV, and stood in the kitchen, where I could hear what it was they were saying, and where I could glimpse half of Mackenzie's mother's face through the open door. She spoke with my father in the living room about a sample of her stool, which she brought with her in a plastic sandwich bag, and that inside a brown bag clenched in her hands. She asked my father to identify the flakes in it. She worried they were bits of her intestines, and that she was falling apart on the inside because of all the toxins from the road. My father opened the bag, but revealed no disgust at all, which made me proud of him, and he said, as kindly as he could, "This all looks fine to me, Carol. There's nothing to worry about here. Let me throw this away."

"Maybe you didn't look close enough," she said. "What is that, right there?" But it was only shit and more shit and my father found a nice way of telling her this.

Mackenzie's father came later to apologize and to thank my father, but he was working. There was only mother at home and me. So he asked us to pass along his

thanks, and then he gave us two small cartons of blueberries, which he had picked the day before. I imagined him there in the blueberry field alone.

My mother cut hair. Not professionally, but she cut my hair and my father's. Dave stood there in the entryway and was unable to think of anything to say, so he removed his hat and ran his hand through his hair, which was long and gray by the ears. My mother said he looked like he could use a trim, and he agreed. She put him on a kitchen stool by the kitchen island and bibbed him and cut his hair that afternoon and asked him to lean his head back into the sink beneath the faucet. She ran her fingers through his bangs—just the tips of her fingers—which made Dave close his eyes. I sat in the living room with the television on and watched them there, laughing about life and the way of things and the delirious passage of time, and it occurred to me right then that they, and everyone else, had been a child like me, and that I too was destined to endure the unimaginable sadness of the world, and that there was nothing to be done about it.

* * *

"It's not fair that you saw my mom like that," Mackenzie told me the day after. "You shouldn't have looked at her like that."

"I'm sorry."

"You shouldn't have watched."

"I didn't mean for it."

Then she left before said anything more.

I didn't see her the following day, or the day after, and I worried that any affection she'd had for me was gone. It made me feel lonely to think of the chickens and that they would get larger and molt and that I couldn't watch with her, and that she would

go again to the woods alone with no one to hide behind the trees and wait for her to come back, just to know that she was okay. I imagined that, without me, she would come and she would go, and someday, upon her return, she would not be the same. She would be some different sort of forest creature. And what of the chicks that may die as they sometimes did—would she bury them alone? Would she dig the grave and say the prayer and hold the vigil? Imagine the dirt beneath her little nails. Imagine her above a bathroom sink in the nighttime, and through the wall the sound of the TV set in the guest bedroom still playing its netherworldly infomercials and her mother there, dying, and with those rattling eyes. Was one enough to mourn and to hold ceremony? I was worried for her, and I was sad for myself—that I could not bear with her beneath that weight.

* * *

She returned to me after the passage of a few sprawling days, and those populated with their own sprawling moments—revolutions of the earth and moon it seemed—some great distance. And yet she came to me again, though in despair, with her hands all restless at her sides, with her hair caught in the corners of her mouth.

"He found them," she told me. "My father. The chickens. He went to the shed for a shovel."

And what was it that I said then, or was there anything I said at all?

"He's had them removed," she said. "Are you listening to me?"

"To where?"

"I don't know where. We were stupid, not to think of that. Imagine how stupid we were to put the chickens there in the shed with the stuff for the lawn."

"What did he do?"

"I know it was my idea to put them there, but you didn't have any better ideas. Or you didn't say so. If you had, you should have said so, and then we wouldn't be here."

"I didn't have any."

"They're gone. All of them. I asked him what difference it made to him, us saving them."

"What did he do with them?"

"He said that they weren't ours to save, not even if they'd been thrown away first. And he said that he needed the shed—the space in it."

I wanted to put my arms around her shoulders.

"I don't know what he did with them," she said. "He took them back to the farm maybe. I don't know what he did with them because he wouldn't tell me, and because I was crying too hard to hear all that he said. I don't care that you know I was crying, because that's the way it happened."

I didn't tell her that I had seen it from the kitchen window. That I had watched her there in the afternoon entering the shed, finding it empty, and I imagined dusky, and semidark except for the slivers of light pressing through the wall seams, and it all still smelling of baby birds. I'd seen Mackenzie burst from the shed and find her father there in the hedges and beat her open hands against his chest, yelling, *Where are they?* From the low corner of my deck, I watched them in the yard tussle and I watched him shake her until she went quiet. I stood there afterward for a while flicking my fingers with my thumb.

And then here she stumbled into me and wrapped around my waist. We stood like this for a while in the grass, and she left a wet smear of her face in my shirt. Then she

said she wanted to show me something, and she took me wordlessly again to the woods, just to the inside edge of them, into the first cover of shade. She set me there opposite her like this, with our shoulders matching, and she put her lips on mine and she put her hands beneath my shirt. She told me to close my eyes, except, at first, I didn't. I watched her face, and the small movements of her eyelids, and I felt her fingers, which were cold, press into my sides and my back and run up to the vulnerable space beneath my arms, and down again, where she set our waists together. She kissed me as though she meant to knock my teeth loose.

I ran from her. The moment I did close my eyes I was gone. Her fingers were gone. The warmth of her breath in my mouth: gone, and I was already running away. I left her in the woods, standing there. I imagined her face. I imagined I had made her cry. There was the grass pulling around my shins, and then me through the fence and slipping past the patio door, and then pacing the length of my bedroom, where I called myself cruel names. My teeth chattered. You will never see her again, I thought. Not now that you've left her like that. Not now that there are no chicks in the shed. It shamed me to have shamed her like that.

Except some hours later Mackenzie flicked her bedroom lights on and off and on again and then stood at the window until I stood at mine and she waved. She pointed that way, toward the backyard, and mouthed a series of words I couldn't make out, and then she waved in a way that meant, come with me. I watched her for a while, until she pointed at the yards again and turned off her light and disappeared into the hallway.

This was in the redness of the late evening, beneath pink-ribbon clouds skittering off into the distance. Mackenzie had her father's camera in her hand, which she held up to me briefly as though to say, I have this camera.

"I'm sorry," she said.

"All right."

"Do you forgive me for it?"

"Okay."

"It was stupid of me," she said.

We were quiet for a moment. "I don't want you to tell people, " I said, "I don't want you to say: please don't ask me about him. Do you understand? I don't want you to say that about me."

"I understand," she said. "I won't do it again."

I nodded, and Mackenzie picked a stem of grass and rolled it around her finger.

"Do you want to stay out here with me then for a while?" she said, and I told her that I did.

Mackenzie smiled and went on and left me to follow after her. See how she moved in the field like a golden gymnast, and the sun, at this angle, as it prepared itself against the western hills, pouring through the meadow grass like water. And when, over her shoulder, she looked at me then, how she fixed me in place, as though she might have held us steady from growing old, and growing sad and cold, and from the rising everything that would take us under (but not under yet—look at us. My god. See the way we are in this amber light!).

* * *

Mackenzie and I sat outside in the dark with her father's camera and tried to capture ghosts, except whenever Mackenzie said we'd nearly gotten it on film, it had already turned back into trees. She said you had to look with the corner of your eyes, not straight on, and then you could see them for just an instant, glimmering and glowing and vanishing into the woods. I didn't believe in ghosts, but it was good to sit with her and pretend.

"That could have been my grandmother," she said.

"It could have been mine too," I said.

And then she asked me, "Do you think you can give off ghosts when you're still alive? Like when you get hurt in the heart?"

"I don't think so," I said.

"Sometimes I wonder if there are ghosts of my mother out there, like of how she was. Little balls of light."

The copper pieces were there in my pocket, though I would lose them over the course of growing up—all but one. I lost the first through a hole in my jacket, and perhaps through the planks of dock into a pond where my father took me fishing. The second I tried, drunkenly, to spend, years later at a convenience shop, and when the attendant refused to accept it, I threw it from a car window. The last one, the third, I'd forgotten all together and found some years after graduating from college, in a box in my parents' garage, which was full of what arbitrary mementos they'd kept of my childhood—school projects and yearbooks and a soccer trophy for sportsmanship, and a piece of copper, which was flat and smooth and the shape of a thumbprint. I was twenty-four then, and Mackenzie had already dropped out of college and had already fallen in

with all who she'd fall in with—she'd lived for different stretches of time with people I'd never met. I heard she was an au pair for a while in Prague, and that she cut hair for half a year in Flagstaff, and that she'd been a driving instructor for a class run out of a Sears breakroom in Portland. I heard she was engaged to a painter and that he drowned in the ocean. I heard that she seemed happy enough, and I heard that she looked old for her age. When I found the last coin, I hadn't spoken to Mackenzie in over seven years, and her mother had already starved herself to death, and her father had moved and sold their house himself. I sat with the coin in the guest room, which had been my room, and there: her window across the way. I imagined the shape of her in the dark, and then her voice in the hall, and a light on and off.

HOMECOMING

I'd met Rhonda once before at her son's funeral. She didn't remember this. She'd welcomed us into the church lobby and hugged us, every one, all the hundred or so that came. The pallbearers wore bandanas and carried the casket out with *School's out for the Summer* playing over the speakers. None of them were older than nineteen. I met her again four years later. When Caroline introduced us then, it was as if for the first time. I wasn't anybody to her, which was fine. I didn't expect to be. I was happy not to be.

Caroline had standing weekly plans with Rhonda. She told me to come along and meet Rhonda for a drink. She said we could go elsewhere later. I made a list of places in my head.

Rhonda was just a little overweight. She had blonde hair, which looked particularly yellow in the artificial light, and two wristfulls of bracelets and bangles. She wore jeans that had been made to look older than they were. There was a certain charm to her.

We met her at Duffy's bar and grill in the promenade between the grocery store and the hardware shop, which had been, last time I was home, a Blockbuster. Across the way, past the parking lot and the diner at the other end, and all the seagulls clapping about, there were the hills and the suburbs and beyond that my parents' house and the elementary school where I once carved my initials into the big oak tree, which had since blighted and died and was removed except for the stump.

Of course there was something more than the tree and the Blockbuster missing—some loss I was not immediately aware of. There was something I had expected would still be here in the suburbs, and that it would return to me.

I had known Rhonda's son, David, only a little, before he and Caroline ever dated. I'd seen him run naked once through the nighttime yard at a summer camp for Christian youth, where we'd committed ourselves to Jesus for the week and were baptized in the shallow end of a swimming pool. I admired him for his shamelessness. I admired him because he was loud and often rude.

There was an old photo of him still in Caroline's glove compartment, and on her nightstand, and there was a sweatshirt of his that she still wore on lazy afternoons. Because she was in love with David when he died, and because she loved recklessly, like the child she was, I was half-certain she would love him for exactly as long as she lived. She would not outgrow him—not the memory of him.

"This is Elliot, is it?" Rhonda said. "Caroline's mentioned you." I said it was good to meet her, and she nodded with the straw of her Long Island Iced Tea in her lips and gestured to Caroline to sit down, which she did. Rhonda, even with a dead son, was considerably younger than my mother. She used to let high schoolers drink under her roof. This was before David drowned in the reservoir.

Caroline said to me, "Sit already."

I pulled a chair up close so that our knees bumped occasionally and so that her hand was easily placed on my thigh when she laughed or when something was said that softened her.

There were high school boys in the three booths behind us chattering and woofing with unevenly matured voices—a few squealing laughs and then one or two bellowing boys, broad-shouldered and tall and squared-jawed. The others were still pudgy children like I had been. Some nights I still wake up and forget myself in the dark, and for a moment I am a pudgy kid again and I am years ago and miles away and all my life is there ahead of me.

The TVs were turned to cable access, broadcasting the high school football game, which was taking place only a half mile away. If we had been sitting outside, we would have heard the spectators off in the distance, somewhere beneath the moth-crowded spotlights. If it had been summer, or early fall, there would have been the gnats too, but I supposed they had been dispatched by the cold. The air was already crisp and felt as though you could snap it like dried twigs between your fingers.

This was a regular thing for Rhonda and Caroline. When it got too cold to sit out in the stands, they watched the football games here at Duffy's, which was plastered with Canton Cavalier memorabilia, and not just from the football team. There were the dance team banners from the state competition a few years ago, baseball jerseys and a bat and basketball signed by whomever. There was beer memorabilia too—old tap handles and neon signs. I don't think Rhonda and Caroline had been particularly close when David was alive, but this is the effect of grieving together. Sometimes I wished that I had really loved David, and that I had been there to grieve with them.

"Did everything get fired okay?" Rhonda asked.

"I had to call Ellen in, but we got all the pieces fired."

"I've decided I don't like Ellen much," Rhonda said. "I'm going to stop scheduling her."

Rhonda owned the paint-your-own-ceramic shop across the way, and employed mostly pretty girls, and most of them high schoolers, except for Caroline, who was twenty-four and something like second-in-command at the Pottery Place. The promenade hop cop stopped at the storefront more frequently after Rhonda took ownership because, for one, Rhonda had a way about her, and for another, there had been a few incidents with sexual deviants, probably because she hired so many long-legged seventeen-year-olds.

Rhonda and Caroline went on about a few names I didn't recognize, so I sat there smiling and nodding.

"What do you do, Elliot?"

"I'm getting my Masters right now."

"What in?"

"US history."

Rhonda shrugged and Caroline put a hand on my shoulder and said, "Elliot teaches undergrads. Isn't that impressive?"

"And what does someone do with a Masters in American History?"

"US history," I said. "And that's the question, isn't it?" I laughed and Caroline joined me, and Rhonda smiled politely.

"Many teaching jobs out there?" she asked, and I said, not particularly, no. She nodded and watched the TV. Caroline's hand was on my leg.

"He's like an encyclopedia. Really he is. It's amazing," Caroline said.

"Just for US History," I added. Though I was trying to, I didn't particularly like US History any longer. My studies brought me back home. The university was only a few miles up the freeway, at the edge of downtown.

Rhonda said, still watching the TV, "Well if I need to know something about American history, you're the first I'll ask." And then to Caroline, "Whatever happened to the tall one?"

"Tall what?" she asked.

"Steve. Steven. Whatever. I liked that one."

"First of all," Caroline said, "you didn't like that one. And second, I like this one. He's kind of good-looking too, isn't he?"

Caroline had told me on the drive over that Rhonda would love me, and that it was important to her that Rhonda did. I had met Rhonda before I met Caroline's own mother. I didn't think about this at the time.

Then Rhonda was yelling at the TV. She knocked the straw from her drink with her commotion. "Dammit, Shuman," she said. "Always the long passes. We don't have a half-decent receiver left and always long passes. Why do they let the bastard go on coaching every year?"

"I thought the players liked him," Caroline said.

"You know David never scored a single touchdown, not all three years he played?"

Caroline said she remembered. "But he always liked Shuman," she said.

"Shuman never had a clue how to work David out there. You remember how fast David was. Not a single touchdown. Doesn't matter if they like him." Rhonda took up her

straw and rubbed the ends of it somewhat clean with her fingertips and dropped it back in her drink, which was now mostly melted ice. She gestured to the waitress for another. "Where'd you two meet?" she said.

"We knew each other a little from high school," I said.

"You went to Canton?"

"I did," I said. "Graduated in '07"

Rhonda was suddenly paying me her complete attention.

Caroline nuzzled her shoulder into mine and said to Rhonda, "Elliot knew David."

Rhonda said, "You knew Davy?"

"I did," I said.

"You knew my boy."

"We all loved David," I told her, which was a good-hearted exaggeration. We felt the same way about anyone we had ever known that had died—our dead, bigoted grandparents, or our elderly neighbors, or Tina Shelton, who was killed by a man outside an under-age dance club. It was very easy to love people who had died.

Rhonda let go of her drink and patted my wrist and said, "Of course you did. I'm so glad," and Caroline's hand slipped absently, innocuously, to the inside of my thigh, or just on the edge of the inside.

There was another round of drinks, which I attempted to buy, but Rhonda refused my money. I told her what I remembered best about David—about the summer camp and the pool baptism and David streaking and how much we admired him then. And this was all true. I hadn't thought of David in years, but every bit of this was true so far.

"It's been four and a half years, and I'm still meeting new friends of David's. Not as many now, but I'm still meeting them. And you know what they tell me, every one of them, they say: we loved your boy." She exhaled and smiled at Caroline. "More people loved Davy in his nineteen years than have loved me in all my life."

She started in on her favorite stories of David. A few I had known, not first hand, most I didn't. Even for these I laughed and smiled and acted like I had only forgotten. "That sounds like David," I said. What I remembered was David telling Maggie Ann, in the seventh or eighth grade, that she had floppy titties, and that afterward Maggie Ann wore heavy sweatshirts even in the summer.

* * *

Rhonda had planned to drive by the football game once it was over to drop off a flat of Gatorade for the players. Rhonda was insistent and sitting halfway in the cab of her pickup, and Caroline was holding her by the sleeve and wrestling playfully for her keys.

I had not, at this moment, slept with Caroline. I was thinking about that. Only peripherally. When fathers tell their daughters that boys are always thinking about sex, this is only half-true. It's a dull awareness that sex is present and sometimes possible, and that, in the absolute right circumstance, you might die for it, so long as the death was quick and far off in the future.

I carried the Gatorade from her truck bed to my trunk and we drove her there. Caroline and Rhonda sat in the backseat and sang a song I didn't know. This was in the hills, and the main road passed though a tunnel just before the high school lot. Really it was more of an underpass, but even so Caroline yelled out, "Hold your breath." She

puffed her cheeks out and plugged her nose and wished for something. I thought that was the sweetest thing.

The stands were empty and most of the players had left. The concession stand had its metal shutter pulled down over the counter. Rhonda slipped from the car like a child escaping her mother at the supermarket. Caroline moved to the passenger seat beside me and we watched Rhonda hug everyone that was left, even the younger siblings of players and a couple girlfriends wearing jerseys.

"I'm sorry," Caroline said. "She gets this way when she's had a few. She'll only talk about David. I should have told you."

This hadn't occurred to me as something to apologize for. I said, "It's fine, Caroline. This is fun. We're having fun." And I meant it. I was happy to be there with her so late at night, in what remained of my childhood and in what remained of hers.

"You're good with her, you know? I thought you would be, but I'm still glad. It's just—it's hard sometimes to tell how she'll be."

She kissed me and put her hand on my sternum and there was the heat of her palm and the small, coordinated movements of her fingers.

Maybe some of it was just the passage of time, but I think David's death made Caroline older. Made her sweeter. Older, and sweeter than I was. Caroline leaned back in her seat and watched Rhonda out there with the team, moving as though she were acting out a play. She cocked an arm back and held and imaginary football aloft and threw it into the distance. I wondered if Caroline could feel more deeply than I could.

"What are you thinking?" I asked her.

"Nothing," she said. "I'm not thinking about anything."

* * *

There was a moment when I knew I loved Caroline. This was a year after the night at Duffy's. This was just north of Oregon's southern border at a rest stop. I was smoking a cigarette as Caroline came out from the bathroom and we noticed, both of us, that the ashtray by the garbage can was empty except for the black sand, and in it there was a child's lonely handprint. Caroline said, "Look at that." Then she was quiet as though it meant something important about life. I moved to put my cigarette in the tray and she stopped me. "Don't," She said. "Throw it on the ground."

"That's littering," I told her. "Even just a cigarette."

"That's okay," she said.

"Someone else will come along after us and do it."

Caroline said, "Maybe so. But it doesn't have to be you." Then she plucked the butt from my fingers and threw it in the parking lot and she kissed my hand.

For whatever reason, I realized right there that I loved her more than I'd ever loved anything.

* * *

Rhonda's house was only a few minutes off, up in a string of townhomes that overlooked the interstate and the overpass and, on the other side, the shopping mall, which was even at this hour still lit—the lots and parking structure and the signs rising up from the movie theater.

We went inside with her just to be sure she settled all right and didn't spend the night on the sofa or the kitchen floor. Caroline told me quietly, as we followed Rhonda,

that she worried about this often. The thought made her very sad. There was still the flat of Gatorade in my trunk, which I would find a few days after and never return.

The place was pristine, except for a jacket on the sofa and a mug on the table. There were vases filled with dried plants and decorative bowls of tumbled rocks. And though she lived alone, the TV was on when we opened the door, and upstairs I could hear a radio playing.

"Sit down," she was saying, pointing at the sofa. "Sit already." And then she was rummaging through a cupboard somewhere in the kitchen and Caroline said, "Just a little while. Just for a moment." Already Caroline's eyes moved with a delay. Rhonda reappeared with three glasses and a bottle of vodka pinned beneath her arm. "Here we are," she told us. Caroline sighed and rubbed her knuckles into her eyes. Rhonda poured a glass and handed it to me, which I took. Then one for Caroline, which Rhonda waved sloppily in her face until Caroline took it too. Rhonda poured one for herself and refilled the first sip immediately. The glasses never went all the way empty. Rhonda and Caroline sat on the carpet with their legs folded under them and leaning their elbows on the coffee table. I was above them on the sofa.

"I don't understand how you can keep going, Rhonda," Caroline said. "I'm already half asleep." She turned to me. "You'll have to drop me straight home."

"The night is young," I said.

Caroline laid her forehead down into the her of elbow, which was propped on the table, and said, "No it isn't. It's one AM. The night's already gone. It's already tomorrow."

"It's still dark," Rhonda said. "It's still yesterday." She set her drink down and wrestled her blouse off without explanation. She was wearing a tank top beneath that, which would have gone mostly unnoticed in the summer, but, because this was winter, the bareness of her arms and collarbones, her shoulders—it was as if I'd wandered into a private place—as if I were supposed to cover my eyes and apologize and back out the way I came.

There were pictures of David on the end tables and the walls and shelves. Some with Caroline. Except for maybe a couple at his funeral, which I could not clearly recall, I hadn't seen photos of David when he was so young. The face was still there, but the proportions were different. There wasn't the sharpness in his cheekbones, or the heaviness of his brow. I imagined that there were other versions of himself he might have grown into. There were pictures of Rhonda and David together too, some with David on his mother's lap. There was a picture of David after puberty, his mother beneath his arm and hugging him around the waist.

She hadn't changed much since the photos were taken. Rhonda was a little thinner then, but she looked mostly the same. Her hair was longer. I think I expected something different—that losing a son would mark you somehow on the outside. Maybe that was the mark—that she looked mostly the same.

I hadn't been thinking about the absence of a father in the photos, but Rhonda said anyway, watching me study the photographs, "I knew who the father was—Davy's father. I had a pretty good idea."

"Did you?"

"He was only a kid though. So was I, except there wasn't a choice for me. The last time I saw him he was kicking a soccer ball around the field. I couldn't tell him," she said. "And now it's too late, isn't it? What could I tell him now?"

"I don't know."

"Would you want to know?" Her eyes were red-rimmed and glistening.

"No," I said. "I guess I wouldn't."

"What could I say to him now? He's probably married. He probably has children of his own."

Caroline picked her head up from the table and looked around as though taking inventory. I eased off the couch and down behind her and nestled her into me, which she didn't seem to notice all that much, though she laid her head back against my shoulder. Rhonda scooted around the table and leaned back with us and said, "My baby girl. My precious girl," and ran a finger through her bangs and down along the temple. Rhonda's head was on my other shoulder. Three heads there, like a basket of fruit, but hiccupping quietly.

"We should leave soon," Caroline said with her eyes closed.

"Elliot," Rhonda said, "What's your favorite memory of Davy?"

I told her: once—this was in middle school—we were TPing Holly Henderson's house—TPing was still fun—and right in the middle of it her father came out. I hid in the hedges while all the other boys—there were four of us—ran off flailing through the streetlights and into the dark. Mr. Henderson found me and held me by the arm and said I would clean the mess, even the trees, all of it, or else he would call the police. Holly was there in the bedroom window. So I cleaned. Holly watched and laughed on the phone

with whomever as I wound my arms up with toilet paper. And then David returned. When he saw that I was not with them, he came back for me. He took the other half of the mess. “That’s just the sort of guy Davy was,” I told her. I said it had meant a lot to me at the time.

Rhonda hooked her arm into mine and said, “Nobody had a better heart. Not better than Davy.”

“You never told me,” Caroline said. She was mumbling. “I didn’t know you spent much time together.” Then she lifted herself up from our pile of heads and shoulders and knocked us loose and laid herself down on the sofa and fell asleep.

Rhonda and I sat on the floor for a few moments of silence before she said, “I want to show you something.” She pulled me upright by my elbow and led me up the stairs, holding the banister tightly as she went. She pushed a door open and hung to the side of the doorway so that I could look in.

“Davy’s room,” she said.

I had never been in his room before, and I wondered if Rhonda knew that. I followed her in. David’s desk was undersized and built into the windowsill and beside it was a poster of a model in a bikini.

She watched me look over the room. “I never liked that,” she said. “Not one bit. That poster.” She pointed at it. “Just because I was a mother and I wasn’t supposed to approve. If it had been in anyone else’s room, wouldn’t have given it another thought. But my Davy.”

“I had one like it,” I told her. I approached it and ran my thumb over the silver tack in the bottom corner. “My mom was the same way.”

Something occurred to her. “See this,” she said. “You’ll think this is funny. I know you will.” Rhonda pulled a swivel chair out from under the desk and clumsily over the carpet to the open closet. She hoisted herself onto the chair, which clicked and shifted under her weight. I rushed to her and held her waist.

“Easy,” I said. “Careful.”

She patted along the top shelf of the closet and the hem of her shirt pulled up so that my fingers were against the small warmth of her skin. She put a hand on my shoulder and eased herself down and turned to show me the shoebox in her hands. “I’ve never shown anyone this. You’ll think this is funny,” she said again.

There was a stack of porno magazines and scattered condoms and a half full packet of cigarettes and photos, which I quickly realized were of Caroline. In most she was naked, or mostly naked, lying on his bed and laughing or with pouted lips. One of her bundled up in the bed sheets asleep with her bangs hanging over half her face and, I imagined, fluttering over her nostrils as she exhaled. And I imagined David behind the camera, kneeling down beside the bed, and even though he was dead, he would get to keep this vision of Caroline forever. She was maybe seventeen or sixteen and as beautiful as she would ever be.

Rhonda set the photographs in my hands and trembled beside me. It was someone different, it seemed, in the photographs. Caroline, but not Caroline. Not her anymore. How was I supposed to feel? I felt as though I’d never known her at all. And then, as I sifted through the photo stack, Rhonda removed them from my hands and placed them in the box, and then set the box behind her on the desk. We were quiet.

"Do you remember when I found out they were having sex?" she said. "Did he tell you all?"

Absently, with the images of Caroline still there, uncovered, in my memory, I said, "Sure."

"A sliver of a condom wrapper in the wash, in the lint trap. Just a sliver, but I recognized it. I knew what it was."

By whatever coincidence, this was exactly how my mother discovered that I was having sex too. This exactly—a sliver of a condom wrapper that went from my pocket to the lint trap. My mom had it in her palm. She held it out to me and expected me to say something.

"I remember," I told Rhonda.

"I was so upset then. I remember that. But now, oh God, now I am so grateful. I am so grateful that my boy didn't die before he had loved someone. Think of it," she said and then lost her speech for a moment. "I wouldn't have been able to bear it. Do you understand?"

"I do," I said. "I understand."

"Sometimes—I know this isn't right—sometimes I wish that Caroline got pregnant before Davy…then there'd still be something of him. I could be a grandma. Is that so wrong to wish?"

"No," I said. "I think I would wish that too." Except I had absolutely no idea what it would be like to be a mother or to outlive a son or what I would wish for.

She laid her head down on me and tucked herself under my arms and I realized how much larger than her I was. Even though she was older, and even though she had birthed and lost a son, she was so much smaller than me.

She kissed my cheek. Her face was all slick with tears. And then she kissed my cheek again, but also over the very corner of my lips. Then once more on my lips with her eyes closed and with her fingertips in my shoulder blades. Rhonda retreated far enough to see me clearly—to look at me carefully. I felt her eyes flutter over my eyes and the features of my face and the shape of my hair, as though there was something to discern in me, or to divine from me, or to remember. The stillness of the room pressed down on us and threatened to burst. So I said to her, "You're very pretty," which—because she was still a girl in my arms—seemed like the appropriate thing.

"You don't have to say that," she said. "That's nice of you to say, but you don't have to say that."

She left the room and me in it wondering how whatever it was that happened here would affect what would come of things downstairs—what of Caroline on the sofa, and of Rhonda, her footsteps just now patting down the stairs. I followed her at a safe distance and found her leaning over Caroline on the sofa, pulling a blanket up around Caroline's shoulders and parting her hair so that she could see her face.

"You can leave her here to sleep," she whispered. "I'll keep her tonight."

"All right," I said. "Goodnight then."

"Goodnight."

I felt like it might have been appropriate to kiss Caroline's sleeping face, or to touch her hair then, as Rhonda had. I stood at the entranceway for a moment and thought

about this. Rhonda sat in the recliner, angled obliquely toward the sofa, and hugged a pillow over her lap and fell asleep watching Caroline.

I drove home, and crept into my parents' house, where I was staying in the guest bedroom, which had once been my bedroom. The walls had been repainted, and though the bed was the same bed I had always slept in, the bedding was new and smelled like people who were not me.

* * *

Caroline and I loved each other for a while and then we hurt each other as people do. We saw ourselves in each other. We saw our own meanness and our fears. We saw our ugliness, and the ugliness of everyone we had ever loved or would love. And that we still cared about each other—somehow that wasn't enough, despite how big it all felt in our chests.

There was a night, years after all this, in the bedroom of Caroline's apartment, where she told me, half-drunk and naked and with her bangs caught in the corner of her mouth—she told me, "Like you don't know me. Do it like you don't know me." Except I didn't know how. I didn't know how that should look, or how to pretend that I hadn't memorized every angle of her. I did my best to touch her like a stranger, to take her as though this was the last time, and I think I knew that it was. I think I knew, all tangled up in her, that whatever it was we were, it had come and gone while we weren't looking. It was like dying in our sleep. It was like waking up as ghosts. And this—these naked bodies, this halflight, these touching waists: this was our best impression of love.

Even now when I haven't spoken to Caroline in something like two years, or three, or however long it's been, even now when the last of Caroline's letters are bound

up in a box in my parents' garage, I still think about David, who died with so little effort, and that terrifies me still. I think about Rhonda. I think about how she saw David's face in mine, and in Caroline's and in those faces of the football players beneath the lights out in the winter. He became more whole to her every year.

I told her Davy saved me from Holly Henderson's father, but that isn't true. I cleaned the toilet paper myself, until very late, and found the door to my friend's house locked, and I slept in the hammock beneath the deck. David was not there at all, which didn't make any difference to anyone.

Biography

Taylor Koekkoek was born June 25, 1990 in Portland, Oregon. He graduated from the University of Oregon in 2013 with a Bachelor of Arts in English and Political Science. Later in 2013, he moved to Baltimore where he began his Masters of Fine Arts in Fiction Writing at Johns Hopkins University.